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THEATRE DECORATION.

BY CHARLES M. SKINNER.

THE wise maxim of Polonius is too commonly reversed in the decorations of theatres, in that they are gaudy but not neat. In attempting to make an auditorium brilliant and cheerful the painters and frescoers and upholsterers usually conspire together to make it "loud." This is not a cause of grievance to frequenters of variety halls and the cheaper sort of theatres, but it is unpleasant to people of taste, and even those who have little of the artistic sense feel a surfeit of tawdry combinations of primary colors. The Madison Square Theatre, the new Casino, and the Tabor Opera House at Denver are illustrations of a reformatory tendency in the fitting of our places of amusement from which builders and renovators may gain valuable hints. They are too widely known to require description here, and reference is made to them only to indicate the pleasant fact, that the chromo style of adornment is destined to give place to designs of a more refined and appropriate character.

Cheerfulness is one of the first effects to be obtained, and this may be more easily secured by color than by colors—I offer a distinction rendered somewhat trite by use, yet it embodies one of the most important rules of the decorators art. There should be a prevailing "tone," without doubt, and it should be rich and satisfying, but low in key. When the lights are down it should sink into a neutral tint, or have the effect of shadow that the eye may not be distracted from the stage; and when the gas is turned on again, some pleasant and positive color should be revealed. Various reds, browns, rich ochres with a dash of orange, or the color of ripe old oak, would afford, perhaps, the best groundwork for an auditorium. Pink, once in common use, is too vapid; white is ghastly; blue and green are apt to look cold and dark, or thin and watery if light in hue; strong yellows, purples and vermillions are as much to be avoided as sombre tints. Gold is an agreeable and effective adjunct when applied sparingly and with judgment, although it is not really needed—when used, it should not be as a coating for the bulbous Cupids that sit in pairs about gallery fronts, blandly holding purposeless scrolls and folds of cloth. A score of *amoretti*, varnished and gilded until they shine like ships' binnacles and glare so hotly with reflected light that their chubby features are lost in the blaze—these little nuisances "assist" at half the theatrical performances in the land. Their clumsiness and rotundity suggest the furniture of the last generation: funereal haircloth stretched over mahogany frames on which were carved lumpish pears and melons, that made every sofa and easy chair look as though afflicted with tumors.

I want to urge one thing upon the notice of managers: their thoroughly bad way of lighting their theatres. Do not put lights where the audience can see them without especial effort. Get the handsomest chandeliers and gasoliers that the metropolis affords, but place them above and behind us, where they will shine upon the proscenium and enable us to read our play-bills; not in front of us, where a fog of rays interferes between our eyes and the actors. The stage picture re-

quires that light should be conveyed upon that and not upon the people assembled to look at it, whose sight and temper are often put to severe tests. Decoration and sanitation alike demand the removal of lights from the proscenium and boxes. The sleepiness affecting many persons in a theatre as the play wears on, is not a matter at which the actors need take umbrage, for it results in part from ill ventilation, but chiefly from the constant direction of light against the eye. Dramatic critics often have impaired vision in other senses than those involving an enthusiastic recognition of the last new star.

Is it necessary that the architectural features of public amusement halls should maintain the

and fine flow of outline add elegance to almost any apartment, and the large spaces of an auditorium almost require them to relieve the monotony of vacant walls. Corners might be softened, and dull, angular places rendered less uninteresting by them. It is needless to add that they should be in harmony, as to material and color, with the other decorations of the house.

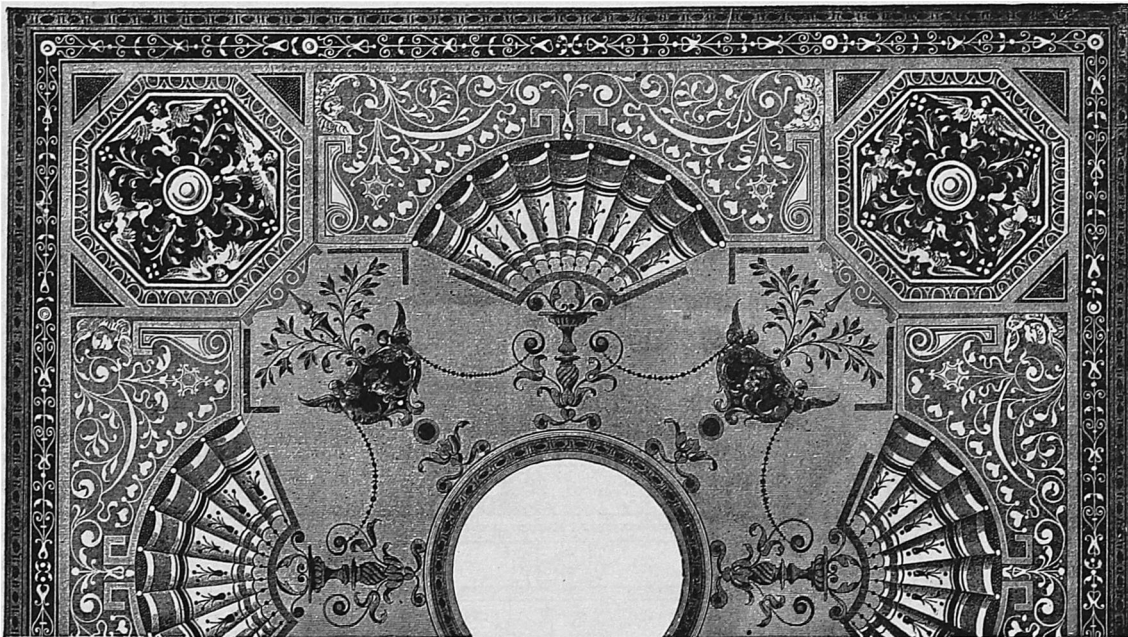
Considering the size of a theatre and the audiences its manager hopes it will contain, an aspect of strength and durability should attach to all portions of it. Frillery should be avoided, and in hangings lace is only serviceable about the boxes; elsewhere it looks domestic, cheap and unsuitable, its delicacy being dulled or lost by more pronounced adornments.

I remember but one instance of an effective use of lace in theatres, and that was in the play-house built by Fechter in Fourteenth Street, New York, now called Haverly's, after the graceless fashion of branding theatres, and even troupes of actors, with the name of the manager, a person in whom the public feels little interest. A curtain of lace of large pattern hung before the baize, and when the latter was lifted lights were gradually raised in the "wings" and "flies," the stage revealing itself by degrees and coming into sight like a stereopticon view. Such was the transparency of the lace that, as the gas was turned on fully, the entire scene was disclosed before the gauzy fabric was drawn

up. The effect was novel and dream-like.

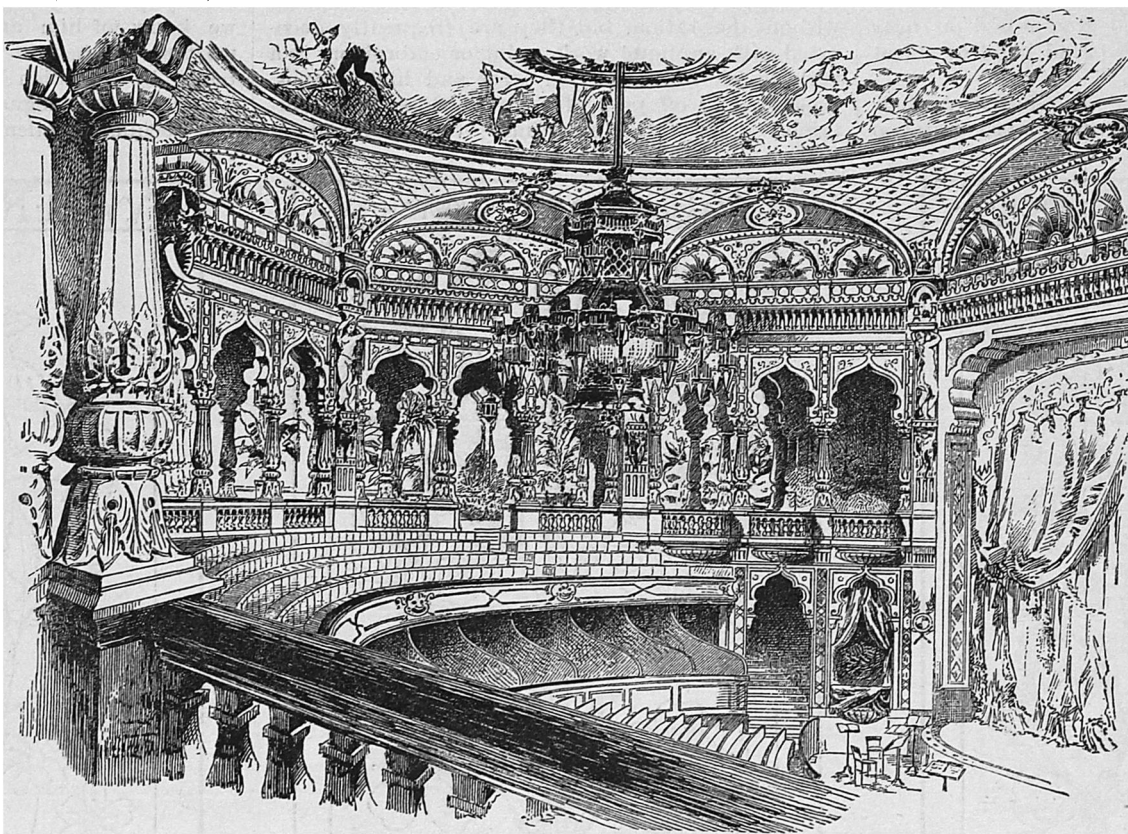
Good drop-curtains are uncommon. What symbolism can be found in most of the designs employed? Does a trite and conventional view of Venice, or a simple rustic view, or a group of vividly attired dancers suggest either the serious or comic side of life as represented behind the footlights? If landscapes are chosen they should be such landscapes as Salvator Rosa painted in the past, or, better, as Thomas Moran paints at present: strong in color, decorative in effect, yet dramatic in treatment if not in subject. Landscapes as wall decorations in theatres seem to be out of their proper surroundings, and they are seldom seen in a favorable light. There is no particular reason why they should not be placed in lobbies if the latter are ample and brightly lighted. Plants, statuettes and the like are also serviceable there, and a Brooklyn manager makes a weekly change in the floral decorations of his lobby. Even more than in the household, unity of style in decoration is to be aimed at, and if not symbolic, the ornamentation should at least seem germane to the purposes of a theatre.

Tapestry Decorations.—A house visited recently is decorated in an original and attractive manner, though possibly a trifle expensive. The hall which is slightly wider than that of an ordinary house, is of marble, and the walls are hung with stamped leather. About the sides stand delicate tables. The reception-room walls are Japanese work in embroidery, the pieces lined off into panels by bamboo rods. From this room the way is shown into the parlor where the walls are geranium-red cloth and the ceiling hung with tapestry. The mantel-piece is of marble and is quite low, while a window looks out above it. The door and window casings are ebonized, and an ebonized stand in the centre of the room bears an ornamental group. The dining-room off from the parlor is still more noticeable, as are the walls and ceiling, entirely swathed in tapestry. The effect is a most delightful one, soft and soothing, almost somnolent. The sensation of being in a box, which is produced by a papered ceiling and walls, is pleasantly replaced in this tapestried apartment by an Oriental feeling of repose.



DECORATION FOR CEILING.

characteristics of an early part of this century? Graceful and light their architecture should be, perhaps, but why render them simple repetitions of old models? Must every gallery post be thin, white and bare, a bald revelation of utility? Must every proscenium offer a spectacle of cumbrous playfulness? Must boxes always consist of square holes in the wall? So with the ceiling: Can we not stretch our necks to better purpose than to view stiff portraits of composers, or mark the aerial



INTERIOR OF THE NEW EDEN THEATRE, PARIS.

gambols of fat cupids, relatives of those sitting on nothing before the gallery, and equally burdened with purposeless ribbons or ropes of flowers? If I ever had an ambition to "run" a theatre—an ambition open to all, like those that pertain to the conduct of hotels and newspapers—it was coupled with a desire to present the plays in a Gothic setting. Not exactly the thing for "Box and Cox," but what a frame for "Hamlet!" And if we should enjoy a revival of Greek drama, fancy the "Agamemnon" viewed through a proscenium in part copied from the facade of the Parthenon!

The use of draperies in theatres might be extended more than it is. Their richness, softness

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